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A MODERN PROMETHEUS DRAMA.

SOON again the *Nobel* prize in literature will be awarded by the Swedish Academy, and speculation is rife as to who will be the happy recipient of the substantial reward and the world-wide fame that will be its corollary.

In Belgium, where a remarkable literary activity has been displayed within the last twenty years, much hope is entertained that one of its writers may be the next laureate. Maeterlinck is already a familiar figure throughout the world, not celebrated, however, as a poet, but as a writer of prose. Another, Iwan Gilkin, though less known outside of the narrow limits of the little country of his birth and activity, where on the other hand he enjoys an enviable reputation, has to his credit works that give him an honorable rank among the foremost of contemporary poets. Few modern productions indeed can compare favorably in extent, beauty, and loftiness of purpose with his *Prométhée*,¹ a dramatic poem of some three thousand verses, crowned in nineteen hundred by the French Academy and, in the opinion of competent judges, undeniably a masterpiece. It is this work which has been admitted in competition by the Nobel committee, and of which I shall attempt to give an idea, imperfect though this attempt must necessarily be.

The Prometheus myth has tempted more than one genius since Aeschylus made it immortal and familiar to all. Calde-

¹*Prométhée*, poème dramatique par Iwan Gilkin in the Collection des Poètes français de l'étranger. Paris: Fischbacher, 1899.

ron treated it; it attracted Goethe in his youth; and his beautiful fragment, a wonderful torso, as it has often been styled, might have become another Faust had not its author decided to abandon it. Among the French, Edgar Quinet composed an epic poem with the same subject; while in England Shelley's bewildering entanglement of lyrical outpourings and philosophical speculation, in which heathen mythology and Christian lore are commingled in a maze of beauty, is more appreciated by the scholar than by the unprepared reader.

Iwan Gilkin's treatment of the old legend has a more modern appearance than any of its predecessors in spite of its almost strict adherence to the ancient data so far as the march of events is concerned. It breathes the restless spirit of the age, the longings of the end-of-the-nineteenth-century mind fed on science and on new philosophies ill-digested; a mind that thinks it can dethrone the Almighty and place Reason on the highest pinnacle of glory, but soon sees the vanity of its attempt, and finally recognizes the beautiful unity of the universe, the interdependence of all things including itself, itself a mere spark of the all-pervading Godhead.

In the opening scene Prometheus, the Titan, is seen surrounded by statues of clay modeled by his hands, and into which he is trying to put the breath of life. Forming men more beautiful than himself after the likeness of the gods—such is his high ambition. But his efforts are constantly baffled. Disappointed and disgusted, he breaks his images and begins his work over again. Day after day he toils thus; day after day he experiences the bitter pangs of his impotence, but day after day the fruitless labor is resumed. His brother, Epimetheus, the faint-hearted, tries to discourage him, and says:

Leave off thy raving, calm thyself,
And check the flight of thy mad dreams.

But Prometheus is no commonplace drudge, no mean spirit that yields to difficulties apparently unsurmountable. The genius within him impels him, and his very pangs of disappointment spur him on.

Thou know'st not what creating means!
The mighty god that shakes the heart of males
Has never made thee feel his call within.
Nor knowest thou what fatal agony
Pierces the quiv'ring breast
And makes the burning temples beat.
O mysteries, O splendors!
Within my being's dark recess ferments
Another world that clamors to be born.
Ah! in the summer twilight hour
When kisses wrapped in mystery pass by,
When like a burning, love-sick youth
The wind caresses low the earth,
Hast thou not felt that souls unknown
Move in thy soul and, trembling, brush
Their conquering wings on the edge of boundless space,
Urged swiftly thither in heroic flight?
Ne'er did'st thou dream of pouring on the world
The impetuous stream of thy life-giving strength;
Thou hast not wept, thou hast not burnt
With longings to embrace the earth
And people her with beings new,
Thy flesh, thy thought, more beautiful,
More proud and looking up to Heaven,
Not unlike us, but equal to the gods.

This is the old Prometheus as we know him from the Greek myth, the man-creating genius who feels the divine spark within him and craves to materialize it without into beautiful, living works.

Next, we have the modernized Titan, the poetic and philosophic disciple of Darwin and the evolutionists.

What was my being then?
Alas! how could I tell?
Perhaps my energy
Of yore was prison-bound
Within thy moldy rocks
By sun and lightning scorched;
Perhaps it floated with the bitter foam
And clung to giant seaweeds.
Maybe it bloomed on swampy wastes
Or crawled o'er spongy forest soil,
A scaly brute with snapping jaw,
A desert lion or a fleeing fawn,
An eagle shooting from the angry sky.
I may have been all that and more,

But a perpetual travail
Has ceaseless urged me on and on
From forms in which I dwelt
To new ones evermore;
So slow, so sluggish in my change
Unnoticed by the eye,
For centuries uncountable
On endless transformation's scale.
Despite the helpless gods,
I rose from plane to plane.
Thus grew before my clearer sight
The grander forms which light assumes,
Imperfect yet, alas, how much!
But perfect in my dreams,
And pure in my desires.
And this is why I wish to shape
The man divine prefigured in my breast.

With the help of Minerva and of love, life is infused into the statues in disobedience to the will of Zeus. I shall not attempt the translation of any parts of this scene. My desire to render the airy grace and charm of this whole conception would be futile. Pandora, the beautiful Pandora, is the first to respond to the call of love. When Minerva responds to the agony of despairing Prometheus, she utters these pregnant words, "All life is love," and disappears. But Prometheus is full of love, even toward his inanimate clay statues. "Have I not loved to the depth of suffering? . . . Such as my toils have made thee, O my Pandora, I adore thee! Stay as thou art, I love thee for thyself, for all the sweetness I have put in thy bosom, for thy beauty which comes from my hands, for what shines on thy brow of my divine dream." And gradually she takes on life; love has kindled the slumbering spark which the divine artist had put into her: "O light—O blessed day! And thou who drew me out of the shadow of nothingness, Father, receive a kiss from thy child." These are the first words uttered by the newborn Pandora; and when in their supreme happiness they sing a duo of love and gratitude all the statues become animate and join in a chorus celebrating the glories of light and life.

No sooner is the world peopled with young mortals than their troubles and sufferings begin. They are helpless and without guidance. Night, wild animals, the elements—all combine to spread terror and disaster among them, and they themselves become like brutes of the forest. Filled with love, anguish, and pity for his offspring, Prometheus, again with Minerva's aid, discovers fire and gives it to his children, who now learn the arts and trades and become powerful. Soon, however, they disappoint him most cruelly. Men treat him with ingratitude and drive him from among them. He has made them, given them fire and light, taught them the arts and sciences, built cities for them, put them on the road to progress; but they will not understand him. Prometheus believes it all to be the doings of Zeus; he believes his children to be the victims of heavenly machinations, and blasphemes more than ever. Mercury visits him, shows him the baseness of mankind, and offers to avert the wrath from on high if he will take back his benefits, undo his work, and let man, the heartless Philistine, sink back into barbarity. His offer is scorned with insults. Nemesis, relentless Fate, demands punishment for the proud Titan unless he bends his neck and undoes what he has accomplished. But he unflinchingly meets his destiny, challenging the whole Olympus, defying the king of the gods himself.

He is chained to a rock where the Furies will torture him and the eagle of Jove will daily tear out his liver. Meanwhile, Zeus smiles and pities his beloved, headstrong son. The punishment he has decreed is cruel, but necessary, and it grieves him because the Titan is part of himself. And then follows that grand soliloquy he utters, majestic words that roll like broad, slow thunder waves across the universe. It is the culmination of this great poetical work, two pages that rank among the most beautiful that French poetry can boast of. How powerless my poor translation is to convey anything like the impression produced by the original, sonorous, melodious, pathetic, and lofty verses!

Poor wretch, who in thy chains
 Dost rave against me and blaspheme!
 Methinkest thou, Titan, to brave,
 And yet thou'rt naught but part of me.
 Thy bold, rebellious heart,
 Thy burning, generous soul—
 What are they but my will,
 My own adventurous might?
 I am the universe, I am the sky
 Dotted with undreamed worlds and unknown stars,
 And grander suns than all the starry space
 In whose vast depth thy feeble sight is lost.
 I am the plants, the animals, the sea,
 I am the earth that sails through shoreless air,
 Night's mystic shadows and day's golden light.
 I am the world, I am the myriad worlds,
 The grain of dust upon the north wind's wing,
 And I am teeming life and rigid death.
 I am the fallen fruit, the outspread wing,
 The jaw that crushes, and the fleeting prey.

I am what is, what was, and what shall be.
 Alone above all things I am the One;
 All springs from me, all must return to me,
 I am all that which is, it's end and law
 Under the changing veil of idle seeming
 In which alone I recognize my essence.
 A speck of foam upon the sea, thou art,
 O Titan, a mere reflection of myself.
 Thy stolen fire, 'tis I; thy somber lips
 Reviling me, 'tis I; the very air
 That answers to thy voice, 'tis I; mankind—
 Yea, and thy hands that shaped them—still 'tis I.
 And the divinities that lust for blood,
 Who on the icy side of horrible rocks
 For centuries of torture fasten thee;
 The hungry vulture that shall gnaw thy heart,
 The rock, thy flesh, 'tis I, 'tis ever I.

God alone exists in this system, but it is a peculiar divinity; it is not the god of Abraham, the one absolutely and infinitely perfect *spirit*, who is the Creator of all things; it is not the god of Descartes, a "*substance* infinite, independent, all-knowing, by which I myself and every other thing existing, *if any such be*, were created;" it is the pantheistic god of Spinoza, "the substance of all things as the infinite unity." However, it is

a pantheism tinged with materialistic monism as laid down in Haeckel's "Evolution of Man," which rejects all dualistic conceptions and holds that force can as little exist without matter as matter without force, and this is perhaps the philosophic leaning of most modern scientists.

Jove's beautiful soliloquy, of which I can give only a part, ends with the significant words:

I love thee, proud Titan, loving myself;
I am thy being and thy nothingness;
Some day thou'lt find me in thy very self.

This is the turning point, and indicates already the solution of the drama as in Faust's prologue the words spoken by the Lord to the tempting Devil—

Then stand abashed, when thou art forced to say:
A good man, through obscurest aspiration,
Has still an instinct of the one true way—

give us the assurance that, in spite of all, Faust will be saved.

Aeschylus makes his hero disappear in the turmoil of a tempest. Shelley, following another tradition, dethrones Zeus and unchains the Titan. Both solutions bring in the *deus ex machina*, familiar to classic drama and even admissible in modern dramatic productions where supernatural personages are brought into play. But either dénouement failed to appeal to Gilkin. Besides being too easy, it was not in keeping with the underlying purpose, and would have missed the high moral significance to be conveyed. Prometheus was to find God "in his very self." He discovers the truth, or rather the vanity of his noble conceit. His sufferings have chastened his soul; his struggles have cleared his mind's vision and revealed to him the wonderful unity of all existing things, their oneness with the great universal principle—God. His titanic yearnings after the highest good were precisely the divine element in him; his creative impulses a God-given force only now recognized as such.

Faust too is a Prometheus, and goes through similar sufferings and frettings against the bonds placed round the soul of man. He too sins and blasphemes. The whole early

part of Goethe's life was Promethean in its ambitions, disappointments, protests, until finally it reached lofty heights where calm and serenity reigned. Earth for Faust and for Prometheus is their purgatory, so to speak. In the crucible of labor and suffering the impurities are burned out of their souls, and what remains is God or part of God, the highest good.

In Prometheus's heart hatred suddenly gives way to burning love for his God, the gnashing of teeth to the smile of happiness and sweet repose in the bosom of mother nature or, which is the same in this system of theology, in the bosom of God. After the last frightful curses a tremendous tempest, shaking heaven and earth, breaks loose. An avalanche of fire rolls down upon the sufferer. The rock splits and his body is torn and racked. The shadows gather round his brain. It is the final struggle, the coming of the end, the dawn of deliverance. After the storm has subsided, the sphinx appears and speaks consoling words. Sorrow is exalted as the sister of happiness, both peopling the mind with images which become ideas. Sorrow protects life by developing subtle instincts that foresee and avoid evil. Sorrow is the holy march of the selected souls to God.

A sweet calm descends as dew upon his spirit, and the reconciliation is complete:

The world is now but one caress,
A tenderness divine flows from all things
Like sweetest perfume from the rose.
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I am all love, my life a kiss
That floats with light through heav'n and earth.

And further:

I've seen the night in which we grope,
And found thee; nothing severs us henceforth,
All that was I now dies and melts in thee.

His last pathetic words are:

All vanishes; . . . be blest, it is the end,
It is the kiss of God the world calls death;
O Zeus, thy exile son returneth to thy bosom.

The close is formed by a short *chorus angelorum*, in which the Trinity of God is sung, God both one and several, Father in his fecundity, Son in his metamorphosis, returning to Unity through the spirit of love and truth.

Prometheus is the creative genius and the rebel. He is the poet, the painter, the sculptor, the scientist, the man that thinks, feels, hopes, and despairs, the man that carries within his breast images of beauty struggling to be born, but in vain. He is the idealist. Our Prometheus is far more symbolical than the simple Titan of antiquity, for he represents the modern spirit so complex who has thrown overboard the wisdom of ages and hopes through new means to solve the riddle of creation that stands as a sphinx on the threshold of eternity. He thinks he can dethrone the God of centuries and pities the children of man—that is, the majority of mankind—because they are still plunged in darkness and do not see the light that he perceives, that he has helped to rob from heaven. He has set machinery in motion; he has connected continents; he has unraveled the mysteries of birth, life, growth, death, and regeneration. Why should he believe in the fables of Jove, Jehova, Vishnu, or Varuna, whose reign of darkness he will soon dispel?

The world is full of god-conquering youths who in the first glory of their newly acquired intellectual strength boast that they will overthrow all tradition and lead the world on to a new light because, forsooth, they have seized the first glimmer of what may be after all but a delusion or a mere will-o'-the-wisp. But they are youths, and their immoderate ardor is but the expression of the glorious life that bubbles in them, that prompts them to great actions, even unto the impossible. Disillusion, disappointment, a contact with life's suffering, a clearer insight into human nature and a truer understanding of human weakness and of the limitations that beset us on all hands soon bring them back to soberer moods—too sober, alas! too deprived of that generous enthusiasm, the memory of which makes us all look back with longing to days gone by.

Iwan Gilkin has also had his Promethean period. As one of the leaders of young literary Belgium he has had idols to break and new standards to set up in the heart of surroundings that were not always congenial. Among the young rebels of this revolutionary period, which was not always free from excesses, many a fine mind lost its bearings, many a one to whom one might fitly apply Goethe's celebrated words: *Er wusste sich nicht zu zähmen, darum zerran ihm sein Leben wie sein Dichten*. He knew not how to tame himself, and therefore he lost his life and his song. To some such crises are wholesome; for they may be the wild oats of genius, and they who emerge from them unscathed are often the strong and chastened minds. They may have left in the fray some of their ardor and illusions; their mental make-up and their religious creeds alike may have undergone a spiritual metamorphosis, or shall we call it evolution? At all events, greater strength, breadth, and depth are generally the reward of the victorious ones.

Those who are acquainted with Mr. Gilkin's previous works, especially with "Damnation of the Artist," "Satan," and "Darkness"¹ cannot help noticing the remarkable difference between them and his "Prometheus." I extract from an article entitled *Il Satanismo nella Letteratura belga* by Rosalia Jacobsen, in the *Rassegna Internazionale* of Rome (October 15, 1902), the following biographical details:

Iwan Gilkin was born in Brussels in the year 1858. His father was a Walloon (French-speaking Belgian), his mother a Fleming (Dutch-speaking Belgian). He received his first education in the Catholic institute of St. Louis. In 1879 he attended the University of Louvain, where he took the degree of Doctor in Law. However, he preferred to his studies the company of the young intellectuals of his time and the pursuit of literature. The poets who most influenced him in his youth were Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Goethe, Victor

¹ The three published in one volume by Fischbacher, Paris, 1897, under the title of *La Nuit* (night).

Hugo, Leconte de Lisle, and later and more powerfully Baudelaire.

Insignificant as these few dry facts may appear, and although I cannot discuss here the influences that contributed toward making our poet what he is, I may state that they throw a remarkable light upon the nature of his literary productions. The Germanic element in his make-up accounts easily for his depth of feeling, tendency to introspection so powerfully evinced in the above-mentioned trilogy, gloomy and morbid as is his model Baudelaire, and for his leaning toward metaphysical speculation characteristic of his Prometheus. From his father, the French factor, he inherits his love for form. This explains his adherence to the literary credo of the Parnassians, whose eye for formal beauty, wealth of color, and correctness of verse and rhetorical figure he possesses, but whose frigid beauty he warms up with the fire of his emotional nature. And note that it is precisely this elegance of form which pure Flemings like Rodenbach and Verhaeren are unable to appreciate, but which Gilkin shares with all the French-speaking Belgians—Valère Gille, Albert Giraud, Fernand Séverin, and others less known.

Gilkin's dual origin, Germanic and French, and his education in a country where the two elements are thrown into the closest contact, so as to appear almost blended, will easily explain how two geniuses so antipodal in some respects as Victor Hugo and Leconte de Lisle could attract and influence him so powerfully, how he could combine the wonderful lyricism of the one with the perfect self-control of the other; how an almost cynical impassiveness pervades his Satanic poems, where the human passions are laid bare in all their nakedness and ugliness, brought, so to speak, under the physician's knife, and described without pity but in a language rich in color and true in all its shades; how finally in *Prométhée* this perfection of language and imagery is mingled with a continuous flow of communicative emotion, without ever going into mad flights or losing itself in the uncomprehensible or the irrational, as is not unfrequently the case with the greatest of French lyrics.

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